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THE LADIES' ROOM: WOMEN ARTISTS AND BATHROOMS

Laurie Simmons, *First Bathroom/Woman Standing (detail)*, 1978





Laurie Simmons, *New Bathroom/Woman Standing/Sunlight*, 1978

Women have long been relegated to being the main actor of the home: the housewife, the mother, the cook, the maid, very obvious and tired stereotypes. These associations aren't as obvious as they once were, but the connections between women and the private sphere are still very deeply entrenched in western society. The home is, of course, the woman's domain, but what part of this private domestic space is *most* feminine? Some might say the kitchen, or the bedroom, but I argue that the *bathroom* is the most feminine space, because it is the most *private* space. It is private because it is feminine, and it is feminine because it is private. This is because the association between femininity and privacy all have to do with what happens in the bathroom: the body is maintained and waste and refuse are expelled, all things that are tied to femininity in patriarchy. Feminine bodies are expected to fit certain normalized standards, they menstruate, they give birth, thus connecting them with the material world, the grotesque, and the Other. Bathrooms and the fixtures within them can be appropriate metaphors in art for women's bodies and experiences because of this association. First, I will outline these theories, followed by an analysis of the use of these metaphors in photographs by Graciela Iturbide of Frida Kahlo's bathroom in La Casa Azul. Like what is on screen right now, I will also show works from Laurie Simmons as well as Frida Kahlo herself to help illustrate my points. Both artists' work often includes women, bathrooms, and themes of femininity and the grotesque.

THE GROTESQUE

According to Mikhail Bakhtin



Laurie Simmons, *Sink/Ivy Wallpaper*, 1973

The grotesque, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is concerned with the parts of the body that lead to the inside, the cavernous parts, and the mountainous parts that protrude: *all that goes beyond the body's confines or boundaries*. This includes things such as defecation, vomit, copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, disease, and physical disability. In the most gross metaphorical sense, women's "cavernous" and "mountainous" anatomical is associated with the grotesque. Women, in western society, have always been associated with nature, with fluids and fluidity and the material, objective world, and they have especially been associated with the lower stratum of the body, such as the belly and the genitals. Much like the grotesque, which is low, wet, hidden, material, and dark. All the detritus that is separated out with revulsion: blood, tears, vomit, excrement, exists in the realm of the feminine, and feminine bodily wastes and fluids are viewed with the highest repugnance. So, one can conclude that both women's bodies and bathrooms are in the realm of the grotesque.

THE OTHER

According to Sigmund Freud



Graciela Iturbide, *El Baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2005

In psychoanalysis, the main psychological actor, or subject, is associated with men and higher thinking. The Other, or the entity outside the subject, is associated with women and the low, objective, material world. The masculine subject must establish boundaries around the feminine Other to separate the Other from itself, to maintain its own identity. Thus, women are associated with the grotesque and the psychoanalytic Other, and therefore need to be placed within boundaries to be separated from the patriarchal subject. For women, these boundaries are gendered roles, beauty expectations, and spheres that women are expected to live within. Of course, women are constantly departing from gendered norms, exceeding these boundaries.

ABJECTION

According to Julia Kristeva



Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me*, 1938

According to psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, the phenomenon referred to as abjection occurs when the boundary between subject and Other is disturbed; that which is abject threatens systems, structures, order, and boundaries. Abjection is the ultimate form of disgust and fear, it is how humans separate themselves from that which threatens their reality, such as waste, death, and any other type of chaos. It is the driving force behind the subject separating its own identity from the ambiguous Other, from that which lives on the margins of reality. The grotesque and the abject have this in common: they exist on the borders of things, they exceed preset boundaries, and this is what makes them dangerous, because they are undefined, ambiguous. As women constantly exceed their preset boundaries in society, society experiences abjection and disgust.

THE BATHROOM



Laurie Simmons, *The Long House (Red Bathroom)*, 2004

Women, the passive Other, must be literally contained within the physical and social boundaries of the private, domestic sphere. Bathrooms are therefore where the associations between women and waste and domestic privacy all converge with the highest potency. Women, as I've explained, are associated with grotesque elimination of the low, material wastes and fluids that are maintained in the bathroom such as blood, excrement, and dirt. Women also spend more time in bathrooms than men. This is not only because of menstruation, but because of the societal expectation to maintain a normalized body that fits within the predefined margins of normalized, ideal beauty. Women weigh themselves, bathe themselves, shave themselves, apply makeup, and inspect themselves in the bathroom.

So, what do these associations mean for women artists? How are women representing these connections in their work?



Graciela Iturbide, *El Baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2005

One very *strong* example is *El Baño de Frida Kahlo*.

This work is a collection of photographs taken by Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide in 2004 of Frida Kahlo's bathroom. Kahlo's home, La Casa Azul, was turned into a museum for the public when she died, but even through that her husband Diego Rivera specifically kept her bathroom locked away for 50 years. Inside her bathroom were her most precious, intimate, personal items, such as her beloved dresses, cosmetics, photographs, letters to lovers, but also crutches, body braces, and prosthetic limbs. Iturbide happened upon the encounter to photograph this by chance, while the director of the museum Hilda Trujillo was cleaning out the newly opened bathroom, so the shots she captured show a raw, intimate record of Kahlo's most private and personal space and the things found there. This room was very important to Kahlo, as she began and ended each day here and used it as a setting for some of her portraits. Iturbide's photographs show the space and the objects plainly. You can see on the screen here, she shoots several different objects, including Kahlo's portrait of Stalin, her crutches, her prosthetic leg, and Iturbide herself in the bathtub, bringing the viewer to the perspective of Kahlo, which you can see in the next slide, in the top left.



Graciela Iturbide, *El Baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2005

In these photos, Iturbide shows us the cans of Demerol, the hot water bottle, her body braces just within reach from the bathtub, objects designed to maintain Kahlo's excessive, disabled body. These objects juxtaposed with the empty and dirty white tiled walls of the half-century-locked-away bathroom highlights the loneliness, isolation, and pain of Kahlo's life in the private sphere. The hospital gown splattered with blood and her prosthetic leg, still sheathed in a boot, speak to her grotesque nature. Kahlo lived a tragic life filled with disease, disability, and pain. In western society's eyes she truly had a grotesque body, a woman consistently afflicted and dismembered, and never fitting into idealized standards of beauty. She spent much of her time inside by herself, bedridden and unable to move around easily. Because of her immersion in her own painful, private world, she had a hard time separating her private life from her artistic life. She was the perfect example of a woman that abjected society, constantly spilling out of her prescribed roles, constantly moving the private into the public through her art practice. Rivera's desire to keep Kahlo's most private items, the overwhelmingly "feminine" material things that attested to who she truly was intimately, locked away in the most private room in her domestic space speaks to the importance of bathrooms to privacy and prescribed femininity. He truly tried to maintain her space in the private sphere even after she died. The objects and space shown here by Iturbide reflect Frida Kahlo's incredibly isolated, painful life relegated to the private sphere as a chronically disabled woman.

In conclusion, bathrooms can be used in artworks as a potent metaphor for women's bodies and experiences because of the associations between bathrooms and the grotesque, the private, the feminine, and the abject Other, as shown in the works from Graciela Iturbide, Laurie Simmons, and Frida Kahlo. Thank you.

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THANK YOU

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